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UNDERSTANDING HISTORY

Beth Warren and Ann S. Rosebery
BBN Laboratories

February 1989

Center for the Study of Reading

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UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN
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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF READING

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Abstract

In this report we put forward the argument that the major problem in history education at the precollegiate level is that the history that is typically taught is based on an impoverished idea--or model--of what historical understanding is. The hypothesis we investigate is that there is an enormous discrepancy between "school history" as represented in textbooks and their use in the classroom and "academic history" as represented in the work (i.e., texts and research) of historians and philosophers of history. This discrepancy may help to explain why students fail to "learn" history (and, incidentally, may also help explain why students find history to be so boring).

To address the hypothesized gap between school history and academic history, we have focused our initial research on elaborating an "idea of history," that reflects something of the character of the discipline as it is practiced by professional (i.e., academic) historians, and on contrasting this idea of history with that of school history (which includes for our purposes both textbooks and classroom practices). Our goal is to develop an explicit theory of historical understanding based on this contrastive analysis and to develop innovative approaches to history education based on this theory.

In this report we discuss two key features that distinguish academic history from school history. They are: inquiry and interpretation. Both of these features point to history as a sense-making activity, mediated by the constructive use of language, rather than as the assimilation of recollected facts. In this constructive view of history, every step in the analysis of some past event depends on asking a question and on interpreting the meaning of that event within one or another historiographical mode (or modes). Indeed, one of the key issues raised by our reading of the historical literature is that of conflict among interpretations: the idea that there are many possible stories that can be told about a given sequence of events. Interestingly, the conflict does not occur at the level of the "facts" but at the level of the particular story the historian wants to tell about the facts. We contrast this view of history with the idea of history found in school textbooks, in which "facts" are conveyed in the absence of any coherent (or even evident) narrative purpose or guiding set of questions.

Our initial research leads us to argue that to invigorate precollegiate history in a way that will both interest and educate students, it needs to be reconceptualized as an active process of inquiry and interpretation (in much the same spirit that mathematics and science education are currently being rethought). This view, in turn, implies a different conception of content from that currently found in textbooks. In particular, it implies a content that brings students into contact with concrete historical realities, problems and models through consideration of both documentary and secondary source materials. In short, we argue for an approach to history that, to use terms current in educational debate, brings "content" into contact with "process," but content and process of a kind that is truer to the historian's experience of historical inquiry and understanding than that found in today's textbooks.

UNDERSTANDING HISTORY

This report presents work in progress for a project called "Understanding History." The first major goal of this project is to formulate a model of historical understanding that can be used to guide efforts to improve students' understanding of and interest in history. In this report, we will describe our preliminary research and outline our plans for the future.

The Problem

The recent spate of books, reports and articles on the teaching of history in American schools suggests that history is anything but a dead subject, despite its status among students as their most boring school subject (Cheney, 1987; Gagnon, 1987; Hirsch, 1987; Ravitch & Finn, 1987; Sewall, 1987). The most frequent object of attack has been the textbook, and justifiably so for it sits at the center of the history curriculum as the principal source of historical evidence and knowledge. A sampling of these criticisms includes the following:

- The content is impoverished (Cheney, 1987; Gagnon, 1987).
- Causal connections among events are not explicated (Beck, et al., 1988).
- The textbooks are dull (i.e., the writing is poor) (Sewall, 1987).

Our view of these criticisms is that they do not, either individually or collectively, cut to the heart of the problem. Rather, they are symptoms of a much deeper problem in history education at the precollegiate level. As we see it, the problem is this: The history that is typically taught in elementary, middle and secondary schools is built on an impoverished idea--or model--of what historical understanding is.

A major hypothesis of our work is that in many cases there is an enormous discrepancy between "school history" as represented in textbooks and their use in the classroom and "academic history" as represented in the work (i.e., texts and research) of historians and philosophers of history. This discrepancy may help to explain why students fail to "learn" history (and, incidentally, may also help explain why students find history to be so boring).

Research Plan

To address the hypothesized gap between school history and academic history, we have divided our research into two phases. The first phase is focused on elaborating an "idea of history" that reflects something of the character of the discipline as it is practiced by professional (i.e., academic) historians. Towards this end, we have read texts from the academic historical literature (e.g., history and philosophy of history texts) in order to understand what historians and philosophers of history understand history to be. Our aim in this phase of our work is to develop an explicit theory of historical understanding, and to contrast the idea of history that underlies it with that of school history (which includes for our purposes both textbooks and classroom practices). In this light, the textbook can be seen to represent just one perspective on the purposes, content and methods of history. The historical literature represents another, very important perspective. Indeed, a critical characteristic of this literature is the diversity of perspectives and methodologies it represents (a point that will be very important to the model of historical understanding we ultimately propose). In the second phase of our research we will use the comparative analysis of school history and academic history (i.e., the resulting model of historical understanding) as the basis for developing collaboratively with teachers innovative activities that will help students develop an understanding of and appreciation for history.

Preliminary Thoughts on the Nature of Historical Understanding

Our approach has been to analyze works of history and philosophy of history with an eye towards understanding the ways in which historians think about their discipline, about the nature of historical understanding, and about what it means to "do" history (i.e., its purposes, content, and methods). We are concerned at this early stage of our work with identifying some of the key issues that seem to define the discipline, even if they are issues about which historians vigorously disagree. Indeed, part of what makes history so difficult and what places it so often at the center of one storm or another is the difficulty historians have in defining their discipline or in situating it with respect to other disciplines such as science and art. When we, therefore, pose the question: "What is history?", we do so with an awareness that there is not a definitive answer to this question. Indeed, the diversity of viewpoint among historians and philosophers of history (which reflects, among other things, diversity of purpose, belief, and method) is one of the defining features of the discipline, and one that may have important consequences for the way we teach history in our schools. Parenthetically, it is worth noting that our analysis of what it means to think historically or to understand history parallels current efforts to reinvigorate science and mathematics education by bringing what students do closer to what practicing scientists and mathematicians actually do (cf. Lampert, 1988; Mokros & Tinker, 1987; Rosebery, Warren & Bruce, 1987; Schoenfeld, in press).

In the next section we describe some of what we have learned from our initial reading of the academic literature about the nature of historical understanding and provide some examples by way of contrast from a few history textbooks that are currently being used in high schools in the greater Boston area. Before proceeding, a few words about method are in order. We read a sample of the philosophy of history literature, focusing primarily on the period from 1800 to the present. We focused our reading of works of history on early American history (in particular, colonial America). This is also the period on which we are focusing our examination of school textbooks. Specific texts and authors are identified in Table 1. In reading these various works, we were guided by the following question: What is the underlying model of historical understanding?

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

For present purposes, we focus on two themes that have emerged from our reading. These seem especially important in two respects, although they are by no means comprehensive: first, they contrast sharply with school textbooks, and second, they have consequences for the way history is taught. The two themes are:

- History is a form of inquiry or research.
- History involves interpretation.

A brief discussion of each follows.

History is a Form of Inquiry or Research

When the Greeks invented history they called it "inquiry" or "investigation" (Collingwood, 1946). History was about asking questions rather than merely repeating legends. In the middle of this century, R. G. Collingwood (1946, p. 273) analyzed historical interpretation in his book, "The Idea of History," and advanced the view that questioning is the dominant factor in history; every step in the analysis of some past moment or source depends on asking a question.

The predominant role of inquiry in historical thinking means that historical facts are not simply apprehended or ascertained. Rather facts are, as Hayden White (1978, p. 43) has argued, "constructed by the kinds of questions which the investigator asks of the phenomena before him." History is in this view a sense-making act. Facts are constituted by the historian's own agency, by the kinds of questions he asks and, as we discuss in a later section, by the kind of story he wants to tell.

The questions with which an historian frames his inquiry are one manifestation of the constructive nature of the historian's work. These questions help establish a framework within which the data can be fashioned into a discourse that conveys a particular meaning or reflects a particular understanding. As an example, we briefly examine two essays by the distinguished American historians, Daniel Boorstin and Perry Miller. Both are concerned with the theme of American identity. However, they approach this theme from very different angles and in the process draw dramatically different pictures of the roots of a distinctive American identity among the early settlers of New England.

In the first chapter of his book, "The Americans: The Colonial Experience" (1958), Daniel Boorstin addresses the following question in relation to the Puritan experience in Massachusetts: How did the American sense of destiny come into being, and what prevented it from becoming fanatical or utopian? He describes the Puritans as being confident that they were "on the right track," to use a phrase with which he opens the chapter. They were a people who knew how to accommodate to the wilderness in order to build their City upon a Hill and perfect their institutions.

In short, the Puritans were a confident people who succeeded in their mission chiefly because their orthodoxy was oriented towards addressing practical problems rather than problems of theology or doctrine. This stands in stark contrast to the Quakers whose unbending devotion to doctrine doomed them to failure. This is essentially Boorstin's argument. He elaborates it principally through description of the character of Puritan institutions such as the sermon, the meeting house, and congregationalism.

Boorstin's analysis leads to the conclusion that the experience of the first generation of Puritans *directly* gives rise to the American sense of destiny. The relationship between the two is one of continuity, particularly in the political realm. As Boorstin tells it, the Puritans worried about the kinds of problems that "continue to trouble American political thought," such as the organization of society and the proper limits of governmental power. Their "practical common-law orthodoxy . . . fixed the temper of their society, and foreshadowed American political life for centuries to come."

In "Errand into the Wilderness" Perry Miller is concerned with understanding how the American "personality" was achieved. Our interest is in the essay of the same name. The question, somewhat generalized for present purposes, he addresses is this: In what sense exactly did the Puritans fail and how did their experience of failure fuel development of a distinctive American personality? His method is to examine, largely through analysis of Puritan writings, how that personality evolved in response to the opportunities and challenges it faced along the path of its development.

Miller takes a decidedly different view of the roots of Americanization from that of Boorstin. In his view, the process of Americanization begins not with the first generation of Puritans as Boorstin suggests, but with the second and third generations. In particular, it begins with the sense among the children of the founders that their mission had failed (because the outside world to which they hoped to be a beacon rejected their achievement), and their subsequent attempts to deal with the problem of their identity and the meaning of their society in the wilderness. The surest sign of their failure lay in a rising tide of corrupt, sinful practices within the community, including the decay of godliness, various manifestations of pride, heresay, violation of the Sabbath, sex and alcohol. Miller understands these excesses and the denunciations that accompany them in their psychological function, that is, as ritualistic purgations of soul which actually encourage the community to persist in its heinous conduct rather than discouraging it. He argues that making money and land speculation, among other activities, were thrust upon the society precisely by their experience in America and proved irresistible both because they were necessary and exciting. According to Miller, the process of Americanization begins here with the realization among the Puritans that they were on their own in the American wilderness, that their identity had to be forged with reference to the New World rather than the Old.

In contrast to the image Boorstin develops of the Puritans as feeling they were on the *right track*, Miller portrays them as being *sidetracked* from their original purpose, which was to establish a model for England and the rest of Europe and, Miller suggests, having succeeded in that to return to England to govern her. Where Boorstin finds continuity between early Puritan experience and the forging of the American character, Miller finds discontinuity. Thus, the story that Miller tells of Puritan experience is very different on many levels from that told by Boorstin. We will not go any further into these differences here, although it is perhaps worth noting, for example, that Winthrop's sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity," delivered enroute aboard the *Arbella* takes on very different meanings in the two essays.

Without judging the resulting histories, it seems clear, even from this brief discussion, that the history of early America is understood differently in the two cases. Different questions frame different understandings of and interests in the period. Different evidence is brought to bear in each case. Different interpretations are made of the process by which the American identity began to be forged. Where these questions and interpretations come from is an issue we will be addressing in our research.

We have only recently begun to look at school textbooks in terms of this notion of history as a form of inquiry. Our initial impression is that the textbook histories, whatever the model they convey, are not written with a model of history as inquiry in mind, in which questions are posed, evidence is selected and evaluated, and interpretations are constructed. For example, in Todd & Curti's *The Rise of the American Nation* (1982), a book of approximately 750 pages in length, there are some 35 insets of original source material. First, the limited number of these source materials suggests that they are subordinate to the larger text, a message that is not likely to be lost on students. Secondly, the sources that are presented are abbreviated. They are presented not as documentary evidence to be interrogated but as artifacts that superficially embellish the text. They are not meant to serve as serious objects of study. Those students who might want to take them seriously will be disappointed.

By contrast, historians make use of a wide range of documentary sources. These include artifacts of many different kinds from many different disciplines. To take a specific case, here is a list of the kinds of evidence that John Putnam Demos (1982) draws upon in his analysis of witchcraft in America:

- court records (testimony, criminal records)
- church records (tithes, membership records, marriages, seating plans, sermons)
- town records (land deeds, charity, births, office holding, tax lists, meetinghouse seating plans)
- ship/merchant records (passenger lists, cargo)
- personal communications (diaries, letters)

These forms of evidence reflect Demos' interest in constructing a history that is grounded in the concrete realities of everyday life and social interaction. They are not the kinds of evidence that typically find their way into textbook histories, evidence around which questions can be formulated and critically pursued. Indeed, the appeal of source materials or data is not that they are necessarily interesting in and of themselves but that they must be interrogated and interpreted according to some purpose or question if their meaning is to emerge. There is, in short, a constructive tension between data and interpretation that is integral to historical inquiry but is absent from textbook histories. The American historian, James Harvey Robinson (1912; reprinted in Tern, 1973) provides some historical perspective on this problem. Authors of popular histories, he wrote,

> exhibit little appreciation of the vast resources upon which they might draw, and unconsciously follow, for the most part, an established routine in their selection of facts. When we consider the vast range of human interests, our histories furnish us with a sadly inadequate and misleading review of the past, and it might almost seem as if historians had joined in a conspiracy to foster a narrow and relatively unedifying conception of the true scope and intent of historical study. (p. 259)

It is worth pointing out that in this work Robinson was pleading for a new history that would engender in readers what he called "historical mindedness," by which he meant an understanding of, or perspective on, present problems that is illuminated by a knowledge of the past.

Consider another example. A quick survey of the same textbook shows that questions appear mainly at the end of each chapter, with one section called "Inquiring into History." First, if genuine inquiry were the aim of the text, then the "inquiry" questions would be used to *guide* students' understanding, not to *test* it (which is essentially the purpose of the questions at the end of each chapter). Secondly, the data and sources needed to support genuine inquiry, wherein students confront conflicting data, evaluate alternative interpretive possibilities, and construct arguments in the context of a meaningful question (e.g., one they have posed), are lacking. Finally, even the potentially good question is undermined by the text. How, for example, is a student to answer the following question: "Do you think that most people in London or Madrid in 1600 were aware of the fact that they were living in a revolutionary age? Explain."? This question, if taken seriously, assumes that students can find within the text the sources they need to get inside the head of "most people in London or Madrid in 1600," but these sources, or even the barest background material, are nowhere to be found. (At this point we should perhaps note that although we believe documentary evidence to be important in promoting student inquiry, we also believe that secondary sources are important, particularly as models of interpretation, to a revitalized history curriculum.)

History Involves Interpretation

The second theme we want to consider is that history involves interpretation. There is a long tradition of comment on this complex issue which we will not consider here. For present purposes, we simply discuss the distinction between history as memory and history as interpretation.

The essence of the argument is that history is not the work of memory (i.e., remembering), but of inference, interpretation and imagination. It cannot be memory because the historian cannot deal directly with events, only with statements about events or other documentary evidence. He is therefore always struggling with the "meaning" of his sources. On this view, criticism of sources and traditions becomes an essential element of historical analysis (cf. Collingwood, 1946). The historian is also always interpreting the record, and in those cases where it is incomplete he must infer what happened.

But exactly what is encompassed by the historical record has also been a subject of debate among historians. In the nineteenth century, for example, Droysen argued that "even if we can say with certitude 'what happened,' we cannot always say, on the basis of appeal to the record, 'why' it happened as it did" (cited in White, 1978, p. 53). In a similar vein, Collingwood (1946, p. 115) argued that "(i)t is not knowing what people did but understanding what they thought that is the proper definition of history" and he went on to analyze actions as having an outside and an inside: The outside is the event which must be established through criticism whereas the inside is the thought which must be reconstructed.

The formulation of a model of historical understanding requires an understanding of the nature and role of interpretation in history. What constitutes an interpretation? What are its constituent elements and processes? Hayden White, for one, has proposed a theory in which the act performed by the historian in writing history is "an essentially poetic act" (White, 1978, p. 48; White, 1973). He recognizes language as an instrument of mediation that is at the base of all cultural activity; through it, historians make sense of the past. It is importantly *not* a neutral instrument. In an essay somewhat ironically titled, "The Fictions of Factual Representation" (1978), he explains that

> (E)very history has its myth; and if there are different fictional modes based on different identifiable mythical archetypes, so too there are different historiographical modes--different ways of . . . ordering the "facts" contained in the chronicle of events occurring in a specific time-space location, such that the events in the same set are capable of functioning differently in order to figure forth different *meanings*--moral, cognitive, or aesthetic--within different fictional matrices. (White, 1978, p. 127)

In White's view, there can be no description or explanation without interpretation. Historians do not first describe and then interpret since "there is no such thing as a single correct original description of anything, on the basis of which an interpretation of that thing can *subsequently* be brought to bear" (p. 127). We will pursue White's argument in our research as we think it provides a rich model for conceptualizing the nature of historical understanding and for reinvigorating history education in American schools. Indeed, we will explore ways to synthesize cognitive science models of understanding with White's theory of historical discourse. For now, we simply want to illustrate the importance of interpretation in any analysis of contemporary history education.

There are many different stories that can be told about a given sequence of events or historical period. The contrasting stories about the development of the American identity told by Boorstin and Miller exemplify this. Where Boorstin told a story in which the American sense of identity was born directly from the Puritan's positive sense of their mission, Miller tells a story of anguish in which this sense of identity begins to emerge out of an awareness that the mission has failed. Another example comes from White's essay, "Interpretation in History" (1978) in which he describes how different writers each tell a different story about the French revolution:

> (T)he events which occurred in France in 1789-90, which Burke viewed as an unalloyed national disaster, Michelet regards as an epiphany of that union of man with God informing the dream of the romance as a generic story-form. Similarly, what Michelet takes as an unambiguous legacy of those events for his own time, Tocqueville interprets as both a burden and an opportunity. Tocqueville employs the fall of the Old Regime as a tragic descent, but one from which survivors of the *agon* can profit, while Burke views that same descent as a process of degradation from which little, if any, profit can be derived. Marx, on the other hand, explicitly characterizes the fall of the Old Regime as a 'tragedy' in order to contrast it with the 'comic' efforts to maintain feudalism by artificial means in the Germany of his own time. In short, the historians mentioned each tell a different story about the French revolution and "explain" it thereby. It is as if Homer, Sophocles, Aristophanes, and Menander had all taken the same set of events and made out of them the kind of story that each preferred as the image of the way human life, in its historicity, 'really was.' (p. 61)

As White explains, the conflict among these different interpretations does not occur at the level of the 'facts,' but "on the level on which the story to be told about the facts is constituted as a story of a particular kind" (p. 59). With this view in mind, our future research will focus on the following kinds of questions: What is the nature of interpretation in history and on what forms of knowledge does it depend? What kinds of problems and questions is the historian interested in and how does he go about addressing them? What kind of story does the historian want to tell and how does he choose to tell it? What can historical discourses reveal to us about the processes of historical understanding?

In regard to the interpretive aspect of historical understanding, what can we say about textbook histories? Is there any sense in which they embody the idea of history as interpretation? In a word, no. It is not that they tell just one story; rather it is that they fail to tell any story at all. What we have found in looking over several high school textbooks, (e.g., *The Rise of the American Nation*, 1977, and *The National Experience: A History of the United States*, 1985, and *A History of the United States*, 1986), is an absence of any unifying structure or narrative purpose beyond the simply chronological. Given

the mountain of detail included on each page, however, it may be that chronology is the only possible framework. Or it is perhaps more to the point to say that without a narrative purpose, there is no principled basis for selecting certain "facts" as relevant and others as irrelevant. The result is a mere compendium of "facts." We illustrate this with two examples.

The first example is from an early chapter in *A History of the United States* (1986). It includes a four paragraph description of the settling of the Spanish borderlands in the 1600s and 1700s. One of the paragraphs reads as follows:

> Missionaries, led by Father Eusebio Francisco Kino, entered Arizona in the late 1600s. In Texas, a mission was founded at El Paso in 1659. Six other missions and two forts were set up in Texas between 1712 and 1721. The Spanish advanced into California after Russian explorers and fur trappers began to show up there. Beginning in 1769 the Spanish built a string of missions and forts to protect California against the Russians.

This is the first and last mention of Father Kino. It is a classic example of the pointless and overly simple-minded detail, reflecting the lack of any narrative purpose to the text. Who, we might ask, is this Father Kino and what role did he play in the settling of Arizona? He is little more than a name. In fact, the mention of Father Kino in this passage is so odd that we might question the authors' motivation for including it. Apparently, history textbooks have not changed very much since 1912 when James Harvey Robinson (1912, p. 261; reprinted in Stern, 1973) criticized textbooks of his time for "a careless inclusion of mere names, which can scarcely have any meaning for the reader and which, instead of stimulating thought and interest, merely weigh down his spirit."

As a second example, consider the following passage from *The Rise of the American Nation*, Chapter 2 ("The British Colonies of North America,"):

> **1 The search for a better life in North America**
>
> Opportunity! That was the great attraction. Like a magnet, opportunity drew men and women from Europe to the New World. But even so, people would not have come in such great numbers if conditions in Europe had been better.
>
> **Conflict over religion**
>
> During the 1500's and 1600's Europe was torn by religious strife. The conflict broke out shortly after Columbus discovered the New World. At that time nearly everyone in Western Europe belonged to the Roman Catholic Church. The conflict began when people began to question Church practices and beliefs. One such person was Martin Luther in Germany. Another was John Calvin in Switzerland.
>
> These men and people who shared their feelings broke away from the Roman Catholic Church and established Protestant, or "protesting," religious organizations. Roman Catholics called this movement the Protestant Revolt. Protestants called it the Reformation. By whatever name, this religious conflict was not just a battle of words and ideas. Armies marched, wars were fought, and thousands died in battle or were burned at the stake in the name of religion.
>
> England broke with the Roman Catholic Church in 1534. At that time King Henry VIII established the Church of England, sometimes called the Anglican Church. The king of England became the head of the Church. According to English law, all English citizens, regardless of religious beliefs, had to belong to the Anglican Church and contribute to its support. (pp. 24-26)

At first glance, the text appears to be coherent and well-organized. The introductory paragraph states that opportunity will be the unifying theme and the heading (Conflict over religion) announces a specific topic to be examined. (Other headings in this section are: The search for religious freedom; The search for political freedom; Widespread unemployment; and Economic ferment.)

However, if the reader takes these clues seriously and attempts to build an understanding of how conflict over religion and opportunity in the Colonies are related, s/he will encounter difficulty. Although the first paragraph states that the New World drew people "like a magnet," there is nothing in this section (or, for that matter, in the rest of the chapter) that explains *why* English citizens interested in religious freedom chose to immigrate to America. There is no discussion of what motivated these people to choose America over other European countries which were closer to England and far more civilized. In fact, except for a vague, side reference to a group of Protestants (possibly the Pilgrims) who went to Holland and were subsequently unhappy, students might not know that English citizens immigrated to countries other than America. In short, students cannot learn from their reading *why* America was a "magnet" for those seeking religious freedom.

Similarly, to understand why English men and women were willing to forsake home, family and country, to risk their lives in a long, dangerous voyage across the Atlantic, and to set up life in an unknown wilderness all in the name of religion, students must appreciate the powerful and far-reaching role religion played in seventeenth century European life. They need to know what drove people "to question Church practices and beliefs." They need to understand why "armies marched, wars were fought, and thousands died in battle or were burned at the stake." And they need to understand why the English citizenry found Henry VIII and the Anglican Church so despicable.

With a subtitle like "Conflict over religion," readers might reasonably expect to learn something about the historical context for the events being described. They might expect for example, a discussion of some of the beliefs and practices that led Roman Catholics to revolt against their Church. Or they might expect an explanation of the motives behind the establishment of the Anglican Church in England. Unfortunately, rather than providing the historical context that would allow readers to understand how religious conflicts fueled colonization, the text concentrates on establishing events in time ("The 1500's and 1600's" and "shortly after Columbus") and on naming individuals (Luther, Calvin and Henry VIII).

Finally, there is no follow-through on the major theme of religion. The themes of opportunity and of religious freedom are established as important in Colonial America, but they are not developed further. Although led to believe that these major themes were to be the guiding threads around which the story of the Colonies was to be woven, readers are told nothing more about the role of religion in America. For example, they are neither informed about the role it played in subsequent Colonial expansion nor about how the Colonists reacted to their newly found religious freedom. With the exception of the mention of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson (p. 29) and their role in founding Rhode Island, the theme of religion in America is dropped.

There is more that can be said about this and other textbook passages that bears on the question of interpretation in history: the adoption of the impersonal voice to lend an air of neutrality and objectivity to the history being recounted, and the lack of any serious attention to documentary material through which students can have some brush with historical reality, or to conflicts in interpretation and growth in historical understanding over time. For the moment what concerns us most is the apparent lack of any serious interpretive element in the school textbooks, which is reflected at least in part in the lack of explanation for major events.

The deep issue, however, is not whether the facts are adequately explained for even if they were the problem of interpretation would remain. The problem, in our view, is not the provision of *a* story versus *no* story for a particular set of events or historical period. Rather, it is the possibility of *many*

stories. This pluralism, however, needs to be understood in proper perspective. It must be understood that in telling a particular kind of story and in representing it in a particular kind of way, the historian is, as White (1978, "The Burden of History,") puts it, "exploiting a certain perspective on the world that does not pretend to exhaust description or analysis of all of the data in the entire phenomenal field but rather offers itself as one way among many of disclosing certain aspects of the field" (p. 46).

Conclusion

Many people are rightly worried that today's students are not learning any history. As an avid collector of what he calls "student bloopers," Richard Lederer (1987) provides us with some graphic illustrations of the state of historical understanding among today's students. To cite just one example of student writing from Lederer's collection:

> During the Renaissance America began. Christopher Columbus was a great navigator who discovered America while cursing the Atlantic. His ships were called the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Fe. Later, the Pilgrims crossed the Ocean, and this was known as Pilgrims Progress. When they landed at Plymouth Rock, they were greeted by the Indians, who came down the hill rolling their war hoops before them. The Indian squabs carried porpoises on their backs. Many of the Indian heroes were killed, along with their cabooses, which proved very fatal to them. The winter of 1620 was a hard one for the settlers. Many people died and many babies were born. Captain John Smith was responsible for all this.

Reading this selection (the spelling confusions aside) one has the uneasy feeling of having seen it before: the style and content are not very far from that of the Father Kino passage.

In addition to the worry that students today are not learning any history, we have another: that our students have no sense of what it means to think historically. And our fear is that if we ignore this second concern, we will not go very far towards remedying the first; that is, how much our students end up knowing depends in large measure on how they come to acquire that knowledge and on what they are asked to think about. We would argue for an approach to history that, to use terms current in educational debate, brings "content" into contact with "process," but content and process of a kind that is truer to the historian's experience of historical inquiry and understanding than that found in today's textbooks.

Precollegiate history, in short, needs to be reconceptualized as an active form of inquiry and interpretation (in much the same spirit that mathematics and science education are currently being reconceptualized, and in much the same way that reading has been reconceptualized over the last two decades). It is important that we demonstrate the possibilities of innovation in a field that, ironically, seems more and more (even in its reformist mood) to be a victim of its own past and traditions. With this in mind, our next steps are to formalize our analysis of history texts (both academic and school texts), analyze some examples of current classroom practice, and based on those analyses, to work with teachers to develop innovative strategies and models for teaching history in a way that promotes genuine historical understanding.

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Table 1

Literature Sample

Historical Works (Colonial America focus):

Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience*
John Putnam Demos, *Entertaining Satan*
Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*
Paul Boyer & Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*

Philosophy of History:

R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*
Hans Meyerhoff (Ed.), *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*
Fritz Stern (Ed.), *The Varieties of History*
Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*

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